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Valentine, C. (2009) A Contemporary Ars Moriendi. A review of *Dying into Grace. Mother and Daughter...a Dance of Healing* by Artemis March, PhD. *Death Studies*, 33: 382-394

## **A Contemporary Ars Moriendi?**

A review of *Dying into Grace. Mother and Daughter...a Dance of Healing* by Artemis March, PhD. Quantum Lens Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts. 344 pp. ( ISBN 9780-0-9793967-9-3). \$19.95: Reviewed by Christine Valentine.

Artemis March, a sociologist by training, has been developing her own style of narrative non-fiction for the past twenty years, something she has come to recognise as having prepared her to write this book. She first became involved in the storytelling business at Harvard Business School where she designed case studies for students and executives. Her research consulting practice has taken the direction of fostering fundamental change in healthcare safety and quality from the standpoint of the patient. A unifying thread of her work is the discernment of structural simplicity and story underlying complexity and chaos.

Christine Valentine is based at the Centre for Death and Society (CDAS) in the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, at the University of Bath, where she has been researching and teaching bereavement from a sociological perspective. She is currently engaged in a research project at the University of Tokyo to find out how bereavement is handled in the contemporary Japanese context. This research will form the basis of a comparative study of continuing bonds in Japan and the UK. Her book, *Bereavement Narratives: continuing bonds in the twenty-first century*, based on research in the UK, is about to be published by Routledge.

*Dying into Grace* is an intimate and detailed autobiographical account of a bereavement that focuses on the bereaved person's experience of her mother's dying and her own role as her carer. Artemis March introduces her experience as a shared journey of transcending of old patterns, keeping Olwen out of a nursing home and healing wounds and losses, which, for both of them, raised the question "how do I let go of my life?"(p.1). She describes this as "the most extraordinary, gruelling, exhausting, surprising, disruptive and transformative experience of my life...." (p.1). She presents it as evidence that dying can be the most powerful and transformative experience in a person's life, not only for the dying person but also the carer. In addition to feeling compelled to write this book, her aim is to encourage people to empower themselves to 'dance with their beloved dying'. This aim is based on her perception that in the US, as a death-denying society, most people cheat themselves of this opportunity.

The book has five parts, which encompass 19 chapters, with headings and content that reveal an interweaving of down-to-earth matters, including a wealth of clinical details and a more mythic and psychological dimension. For example, chapters like 'Is this the call?' and 'Path through shadows' evoke the emotional and spiritual challenges that may accompany dying, while chapters like 'Hospitalizations' and 'Detour through rehab', draw attention to the practical and medical aspects that must be negotiated. The reader is taken through experiences that are both mundane and extraordinary, beginning with the author's decision to take on the role of her mother's carer, followed by the experience of her hospitalization, bringing her home again, setting up hospice support, negotiating the peaks and troughs in her condition, being with her mother on her deathbed and during her dying moments, and continuing her

bond with her mother after her death. The unfolding of events is conveyed through factual detail illuminated by psychological insight.

The author uses the metaphor of the dance of death to capture the relational nature of dying and the way this unfolds according to its own particular rhythm. By taking us through the physical, medical, emotional, relational and spiritual ups and down, twists and turns, highs and lows of her experience of ‘midwifing’ her mother’s dying she conveys how the dying person can be an active participant in their own dying and how a loved one’s engagement in this may facilitate a good death. She describes the outcome of this dance as a hard-won and unexpected gift of mutual healing and grace.

Artemis March’s narrative skills are considerable. She demonstrates a capacity to convey ordinary human detail with an immediacy that has artistic quality, transporting the reader into the situation that is being described. It is moving testimony to both the author’s and Olwen’s courage, resilience and passion for life. Though this book is about death it is very life affirming, an example of living until we die. It demonstrates the profoundly social nature of dying and how a person’s social presence and agency may continue after their biological death. Thus Olwen lives on as an active agent in her daughter’s life as well as in the pages of the book to represent how continuing bonds may form part of a larger cultural narrative of grief.

I was therefore disappointed to discover that the author has turned her very personal and particular attempt to make sense of her mother’s dying into “a new relational paradigm....for enhancing the probabilities that the dying process will open to mutual growth and healing” (p.3-4). She argues that those who advocate such end-of-life potential for growth so far lack such a relational framework, representing it as a solo process. She claims the validity of her model on the fact that “Unlike most models” it “is not a set of generalizations told from an expert point of view positioned

comfortably after the fact. Instead, it is situated in the present moment from the perspective of the caregiver who is composing a duet with her dying partner” (p. 281). Such privileging of direct, personal experience is of course as controversial as that of the detached expert.

Though providing a wealth of material for illuminating the discourses that are being used and the way these may be negotiated to make sense of the experience of mortality in the contemporary US, Artemis March instead analyses her narrative to produce a universalised prescription about how dying should be managed. In so doing, she entrenches herself in the discourses she uses with no attempt to consider their cultural relativity. Thus, the final part of the book presents and explicates a multi-dimensional model designed to illuminate the dance of death and make the process more explicit in order to show others how to dance. This model inevitably reveals more about the author’s own ideals and values and the extent to which these represent the views of others within her own culture.

Indeed, this book provides a very particular instance of how the manner of a loved one’s dying and one’s perceptions of the death as good or bad may shape the bereavement experience. As many studies have demonstrated, such perceptions reflect cultural values and are highly variable both within as well as between cultures. However, in presenting her story as an example of ‘dying well’, that is, one that promotes mutual growth and healing, the author herself makes no such cultural links. Rather she provides a handbook for other carers of their dying mothers, taking issue with the dominant death-denying, patriarchal culture, which has marginalised them. Any more nuanced and reflective sociological analysis is left to the reader to undertake.

I do appreciate that to engage reflexively with the cultural relativity of one's own personal experience is no easy task, especially when it is of such a sensitive nature. However, in opting to take this experience as the basis for making theoretical statements, then such reflexive engagement does need to be attempted. I have no problem with basing theoretical understandings on a single and personal case history, as long as such theorising is subject to careful contextualising. Otherwise the conclusions one draws can only remain at the level of individual and cultural assumptions, amounting to a repetition and re-emphasising of a relative viewpoint that has been taken out of context and used to promote one's own cause. Rather Artemis March locates herself within and joins forces with relational and feminist psychology in challenging predominant but misguided masculine individualistic values. In so doing she places her own biographical situation within a wider imagined community of like-minded others, female carers of their dying mothers, who are similarly struggling against such death denial and the inappropriate, misguided treatment regime practiced by a male-dominated medical profession to become an advocate for their cause (Seale, 1999).

In pitting herself against values that she sees as responsible for the wide-spread cultural denial of death in the US, the author makes no reference to the literature on this topic, which presents a more complex and nuanced picture (see e.g. Parsons, 1978; Kellehear, 1984; Seale, 1998). For example, the way attitudes to death in the US tend to reflect a cultural valuing of activism and individualism is surely relevant to the author's own approach. In conveying her own experience she well represents such values, which in this case are interweaved with more relational ones and placed in the service of dying. Her narrative thus conveys the complex interweaving of discourses that characterise human interactions to demonstrate how experience is never black or

white. Yet, she takes issue with the medical profession, in particular its male members, who are accused of perpetuating a system of death denial that prevents dying people and their carers from what should be a mutually enhancing experience.

Indeed this book represents a contemporary Western *ars moriendi*, providing detailed instructions on the best way to help someone to prepare for and bring his or her life to a satisfying close. Unlike the historical *ars moriendi*, this is not about ensuring that the dying person is sufficiently prepared to meet his or her maker, but rather to support the person to die as far as possible in his or her own way. It is dying itself that has become the final stage of growth (Kübler-Ross, 1975). In this *Artemis March* places herself firmly in the tradition of the death awareness movement promoted by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and Cicely Saunders.

Thus she conveys how her mother becomes more of herself through her dying and their relationship becomes more intimate in the process. In drawing on the dance of death metaphor to represent dying as an intimate, shared, social event, she reflects the way people are responding to the dehumanising aspects of medicalized dying. This approach, which emphasises the social and relational nature of dying, and the importance of facilitating the dying person's continuing personhood and agency is well documented. However no reference is made to the key figures or to their critics (see e.g. Hart et al., 1998; Lawton, 2000; McNamara, 2001), who have drawn attention to the way such ideals have not always taken account of differing cultural values.

As indicated, the book draws attention to the continuing bonds that may be forged between the living and the dead and how deceased loved ones may retain a significant social presence in the lives of those they leave behind. In so doing, it conveys how reconstructing a loved one's dying may form part of a continuing bond with him or

her. The author continues her story beyond her mother's death to the further discoveries she made about her mother's life through exploring her family history and attempting to find answers to some unsolved mysteries and paradoxes. Yet no reference is made to any of the literature on the continuing bonds' discourse (see e.g. Klass et al., (1996).

Indeed, the values the author promotes form part of the contemporary Western therapeutic discourse that provides meaning for a particular sector of society, predominantly middle-class academics and educated lay people. This discourse betrays a nostalgia for a 'more natural' way of dying as represented by "indigenous peoples" who "accumulate enormous experience.....create community structures and rituals that hold and support the processes of dying, care-giving and grieving, and integrate the living, the dead, the unborn, and the ancestors into a single socio-cosmic fabric" ( p.8). However, such peoples are not actually identified and I have yet to come across any anthropological literature that supports such assumptions (see e.g. Boas, 1965/1911; Evans-Pritchard, 1972/1937). Rather I was left wondering about those people who want to slip away quietly on their own, or have no desire to 'grow' at this stage of their life or to actively manage their dying? What about those who, in Dylan Thomas style, refuse to go "gentle into that good night" but instead "{r}age, rage against the dying of the light" (Thomas, 1951), or who may wish to deny they are dying until the bitter end? There are probably as many ways to die as there are to live.

For me, the value of this book lies in the author's personal experience and the way she has conveyed this with an attention to detail that affirms those aspects that are often dismissed as banal or random. Unfortunately this otherwise accessible, absorbing and touchingly human narrative loses impact through overarching claims that can achieve little more than preach to the already converted, whilst alienating



others to whom the narrative alone may well have been accessible. However, my initial disappointment at the absence of any sociological analysis has been tempered by the opportunity it afforded me to do my own. Just as the *ars moriendi* of the middle ages reflects a particular social context, so does the authors' account betray its culture-bound nature, making it highly revealing sociologically. For me, this book represents a particular portrayal of dying, locating it firmly within contemporary Western society, to provide an example of the way people are making sense of dying, and what is considered to be a good death today.

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